

A Questionable Life
Part 2: Hospitality
November 8th & 9th, 2014

On this very weekend 15 years ago, we opened our doors for the first time in Downtown Lowell with a desire to see the city turned upside down by the gospel! Today, we remain more committed than ever to *Helping People Find Their Way Back to God!*

We've spent the first part of the fall looking at what God has done to bring us back into his arms...and for the remainder of the year, we're considering this question!

*"Now that the gospel is going to work in us,
how does the gospel work its way out through us?"*

How do we, as followers of Jesus, join Him in *Helping People Find Their Way Back to God!*

Last week, I told you that in the 300 years following Jesus' death and resurrection, Christianity swept the Roman Empire like a firestorm and transformed it!

This happened for two reasons! First...leaders like the Apostles Paul and Peter travelled the ancient world proclaiming the Good News about Jesus and planting churches!

But this alone would never have had such a transformative effect were it not for the hundreds of thousands of ordinary men and women, like you and me, who bowed their knee to Jesus Christ as King and immediately began living in such inexplicable and irresistible ways, that it aroused the curiosity of the watching world...

They cared for their neighbors regardless of race or social status; they shared food with the poor and the outsider; the men were sexually faithful to their wives; Christian slaves served their masters with joy; they offered medicine to the sick and gave proper burials to all while the Romans left their poor and sick to die on the streets...

Their lives were so QUESTIONABLE!

We must learn from their example if we're going to be effective for the sake of Christ in our culture and community. And I believe that by God's grace and power at work in us...it is possible!

One of the things that the Romans simply could not understand about the Christians...and we know this becomes it comes up again and again in Roman literature...is that they were constantly inviting people into their homes and around their tables!

They were famous for their hospitality! Listen to the words of the emperor Julian, in the 4th century...

"The Galileans begin with their so-called love feast, or hospitality, or service of tables – for they have many ways of carrying it out and hence call it by many names – and the result is that they have led very many into atheism (i.e. Christianity)." Julian the Apostate

Two hundred years earlier, *Pliny the Younger*, a Roman governor, wrote a letter to Emperor Trajan to ask for counsel on how to deal with the church. He reported that...

"Christians would meet on a stated day in the early morning to address a form of prayer to Christ, as to a divinity. Then, later in the same day they would reassemble, to eat a common harmless meal."

Both Julian and Pliny were bewildered because *"The Christians wouldn't stop eating with one another! We think, **'What's the big deal with that?'** Everyone eats.* Apparently, there was something different about their hospitality that caused Roman citizens to begin moving toward Christianity in droves!

What was it? And what does it mean for us today?

In Romans, chapter 12...the Apostle Paul addresses this very question in his letter to the church in Rome! In verse 9, he writes...

*"Don't just pretend to love others. Really love them. Hate what is wrong. Hold tightly to what is good. Love each other with a genuine affection, and take delight in honoring each other. Never be lazy, but work hard and serve the Lord enthusiastically. (13) When God's people are in need, be ready to help them. **Always be eager to practice hospitality.**"* Romans 12:9-11, 13

First, Paul says that we are to really love others, not just play like we do! Then he gives us several ways to do this, but let's look at just two of them!

Love: In verse 10, he writes that we're to love each other with a genuine affection. The word he uses for "love" is the Greek word *Philadelphia* – In that day and time, Philadelphia love, or 'brotherly love' applied to family blood relationships. Yet, Paul applies this to the Christian community by saying, as brothers and sisters united together in Christ, we're to love each other with a genuine, familial kind of love!

Thanksgiving: Now...in just a matter of weeks, many of you are going to gather with family for the Thanksgiving Holiday, and what is the one thing you know you're going to do on that day? **"Watch Football!"** Guys, that's the wrong answer. Let's be honest...no one really likes Detroit or Dallas football! What is the one thing you're going to do? **EAT FOOD!**

Gathering around the table with one another is a central part of most of our family experiences!

So...on one hand, Paul is saying... *"Now that we belong to the family of God, we're to love and honor one another, and one of the ways we do this is by gathering around the table often!"* And we see this playing its way out in the early church all of the time, specifically in the book of Acts!

Then, down in verse 13, Paul writes, *"Always be eager to practice hospitality."*

Hospitality – comes from a different Greek word, which means, *"The Love of Strangers or Visitors."*

In the first century, inns were few and far between, and the ones that did exist were generally unsafe and unsavory! So, one of the ways Christians practiced hospitality was by opening their homes and sharing their food with travelers passing by!

Both Philadelphia (familial love) and **Philoxenia** (love of visitors) are indispensable expressions of love! And in the same way that the early Christians influenced the ancient world by opening their homes and tables, the invitation to share a table is profoundly meaningful in our culture today!

Alan Hirsch and Lance Ford...in their book *Right Here, Right Now*, describe how the table is the great equalizer in relationships! When we eat together, we discover the inherent humanity of all people. We share stories, and hopes, and fears, and disappointment. We open up to each other on a far deeper level than we ever would from the comfort of our lawn or office or by simply speaking to someone in passing!

Hirsch and Ford go on to write that...

*"Sharing meals together on a regular basis is one of the most sacred practices we can engage in as believers. Missional hospitality is a tremendous opportunity to extend the Kingdom of God...If every Christian household regularly invited a stranger (visitor) or a poor person into their home for a meal once a week, **we would literally change the world by eating.**"* Alan Hirsch and Lance Ford

Now...no one understood or practiced this better than Jesus! Author Ben Meyer explains that during Jesus' time a person wouldn't eat with someone of different social standing, and certainly never with someone of a different religion. For example...a Jew would never share their table with a Gentile. We see this in the gospels time and again when Jesus was criticized by religious leaders for eating with tax collectors and sinners...both viewed as social outsiders!

Yet...Jesus turned this social construct on its head.

*"The act of Jesus was to reverse this structure: communion first, conversion second. His table fellowship with sinners implied no acquiescence in their sins, for the gratuity of the reign of God cancelled none of its demands. **But in a world in which sinners stood ineluctably condemned, Jesus' openness to them was irresistible. Contact triggered repentance; conversion flowered from communion. In the tense little world of ancient Palestine, where religious meanings were the warp and woof of the social order, this was a potent phenomenon.**" Ben Meyer*

Don't you love that! **Communion first...conversion second!** Jesus understood that we can never expect anyone to take our affection for God seriously unless we first love them with a genuine affection, and there is no more powerful way to do this than by opening our tables!

Now...let's be honest! Many of us have probably never considered the fact that God commands Christians to practice hospitality. And when we think of hospitality...our minds go to the *Food Network Channel* or fancy holiday parties and some of you...especially guys...you start to twitch and sweat! Some of us immediately think of how dirty our house is and that if we were going to share our table, we'd actually have to clean off our table!

****We have all of these misconceptions of what true, biblical hospitality is so that we have a difficult time even wrapping our minds around the idea. So...before I explain how we can actually live hospitable lives, let me share what I believe are **three hospitality killers** that left unchecked will keep you from putting this holy practice to work in your life!**

Hospitality Killers

#1 – PRIDE: For years, some of the most stressful moments in our marriage were those when we had people into our home! No joke...in the hours leading up to people's arrival, I became a not-very-fun person. Now, there's no better way to model the joy of hospitality for your family, and especially your children than by making them miserable in the process! *"Dad...can we have people over...I just love it when you're grumpy!"*

Years later, I understand what was happening! I couldn't bear to have someone into my home without it being perfect! And listen...perfect simply means that no one looks in *THE ROOM* where you hide all of the junk you don't want them to see!

In seeking to impress people with our house keeping and hosting skills...I killed the heart of hospitality, which is not about impressing others, but about opening our heart and home to care for others!

Some of us don't open our homes because we're prideful! We can't bear the thought of people seeing our un-kept, imperfect, half decorated home! Or, we don't know how to cook and are embarrassed to serve Mac n Cheese or frozen pizza!

Solution: Clean your toilet and order Chinese food! Both take about three minutes to execute on...

Pride will make us self-centered when true hospitality is about others!

"Love each other with a genuine affection, and take delight in honoring each other." Romans 12:10

If you delight in honoring (making much of) the people you invite to your table instead of making sure they think highly of you...you'll become a hospitable person!

The First hospitality killer is PRIDE!

#2 – PACE: The second hospitality killer is our **PACE!**

Do me a favor and write down the last time you had someone into your home, or the last time you intentionally invited someone to join you for a meal (not including family)!

Now...I'm going to guess there are some of us had our neighbors over yesterday, or lunch with a colleague last week!"

But some of us can't remember the last time we invited a person outside of family to share a meal with us, can we?

Why is this?

I'll suggest that for many of us, we're running at such a pace that there's no room for people!

Busy: Not too long ago, Beth and I had some friends over to the house, and one of them remarked that the reason they didn't invite us over for parties anymore was because they imagined we were too busy! Now, they didn't just come up with that idea! In declining enough invitations, I had communicated that our lives were far too full to share with them!

My PACE was killing my spirit of hospitality!

In verse 13, Paul writes, *"When God's people are in need, be ready to help them. Always be eager to practice hospitality."*

Romans 10:13

We can't possibly meet someone's needs if we never take the time to find out what they need! The only way you can be ready to help people, is if you are intentionally freeing up time by which to do so!

If you will slow down long enough to invite people into your life, it will unleash opportunities to love and care for others.

The crazy thing about hospitality is that it's contagious!

The week after Beth and I had our friends over for dinner, both sets of friends invited us into their homes!

Don't let your pace drown out your hospitable heart or the priceless opportunities hospitality provides!

#3 – PASSIVITY: Lastly...and I'll be brief on this one!

Some of us aren't actively living this out because we've never considered that this isn't merely a nice suggestion, but a holy imperative!

We're passive in our hospitality, which means we get around to it when it's convenient!
Remember Paul's words!

"Always be eager to practice hospitality." Romans 10:13b

Eagerly practicing hospitality is the opposite of passive hospitality!

To practice hospitality we must be purposeful about it! We must break out our calendars and build it in! Send out the invitations! But it also means that when opportunities arise, we practice spontaneous hospitality!

If you don't plan hospitality...you'll always find a reason to put it off!

Close

Now...in a few moments, I'm going to suggest several ways we can live out this Scripture, but before I do, I want to give you a motivation for becoming radically hospitable!

I know that some of you are furiously taking notes...and your wheels are spinning...and you're like, *"I've got to move on this!"*

But some of us are still thinking, *"Jed...are you serious! This stuff is for Martha Stewart and people who read Home and Garden! Is hospitality really all that important?"*

It is...and I'll show you why!

Romans 12:1 – In Romans chapter 12, Paul turns a corner and spends the rest of his letter describing the way in which we, as Christians, are to live in response to the gospel!

"And so, dear brothers and sisters, I plead with you to give your bodies to God because of all he has done for you. Let them be a living a holy sacrifice – the kind he will find acceptable. This is truly the way to worship him." Romans 12:1

Paul writes...now that you've heard everything I had to say about what God has done for you...offer your lives to Him!

What has God done for us?

Do you know that the gospel is the ultimate picture of hospitality? When our sin had torn us out of God's arms, and we were helpless and alone, God opened His heart to us and loved us unconditionally!

When we were strangers, God came to us...he found us...and laid down His life for us to make us His friends!

He is a HOSPITABLE GOD!!

Therefore, it is not surprising that one of the primary ways the church has remembered and celebrated the sacrifice of Jesus Christ is through a meal!

Lord's Supper: Just moments before his arrest and crucifixion, Jesus shared one last meal with his disciples, and He said to them! *"From now on, when you gather, eat the bread and drink the cup in remembrance of my broken body and blood poured out for you."*

Every time we gather around the table, we're reminded of what Jesus has done to bring us to the table! He sacrificially and selflessly gave Himself to love and honor us!

On one hand, Jesus' death is the ultimate motivation for us to be hospitable toward one another! Regardless of our race, culture, language, or social status, we are united together in Christ! So let's share our lives together, and love and encourage one another...and in doing so, to make much of Jesus!

At the same time, Jesus' death is the ultimate motivation for us to extend hospitality toward anyone who isn't a Christian! It reminds us that without the gracious invitation of God, we wouldn't be here! And so we seek to be gracious and hospitable toward those who don't know Him! When we do, the gospel comes to life!

And as Paul writes in verse 1...every time we practice hospitality, we are offering a holy sacrifice to God! Hospitality is an act of WORSHIP!

Apply

So...as we close, I want to encourage you to do a few things this week...if you're taking notes!

#1: Eat with three people this week – Now...I don't mean that you need to host three dinner parties, or...that you need to add a great deal to your already busy schedule.

You already eat three times a day...21 meals a week! So...this week, seek to invite another person to the table for three of those! You might even invite three people over at once!

As you do this, ensure that one of the three isn't a member of this community! Share a table with Christians, and with those who don't yet know Christ!

Now...do you know what would be beautiful? If we wouldn't rush out of here today, but would catch someone and invite them to join us for lunch afterwards! Go to a restaurant if your house isn't ready! You didn't see this message coming! I understand. But wouldn't it be great if we'd immediately and eagerly put this into practice right now! I think this is an area for us to grow in together.

So...EAT with three people this week...

#2: Bless three people this week by seeking to do something that will bring joy into their life or alleviate a burden!

Encourage! Acts of Kindness! Generosity!

I want to hear from you...email me and share what you see God doing in your life!!

#3: Pray for one person every day!

Finally...continue to pray for one person every day this week! Ask God to work out his grace in their life!

Harbor...imagine what would happen if God unleashed in us a spirit of hospitality toward one another, and toward our neighbors...such that the gospel became so visible and attractive to others that they looked at our lives and said, *"Who are you? Why are you so open with your lives?"*

It could change the world!

Harbor...I love you and I'm thankful for all that God is doing in and through you!

Pray!